

CAPTIVATING

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

... You see among the captives a beautiful woman and you desire her . . . (Devarim 21:11)

Gravity is a natural phenomenon by which all things with energy are brought toward (or gravitate toward) one another, including stars, planets, galaxies and even light and sub-atomic particles. It is most accurately described by the general theory of relativity, but for most applications, gravity is well approximated by Newton's law of universal gravitation: gravity causes a force where two bodies of mass are directly drawn to each other according to a mathematical relationship.

That's physical gravity. This week's parshah discusses a gravity of a different type, though of a similar nature. And though at first it may seem like something that does not apply to MOST people, understood correctly it can be seen to apply to ALL people.

The Talmud says that a person does not sin unless a spirit of insanity first enters him (Sotah 3a). It means that the person believes in God, knows that Torah is from Him, and that what he intends to do is a violation of it. He knows that his action is the opposite of the purpose of Creation and will result in Divine punishment, in this world, the next world, or in both. Yet, he commits the sin anyhow. Is that not crazy?

How many people have been in such a position and still committed the sin? How many people, after the consequences of their violation became clear, shook their heads and asked themselves, "What was I thinking?" They ask such questions because, after the fact, they forget about the gravitational pull that drew them to sin and spiritually crash.

The "Yafes Toar," the captive gentile woman mentioned at the start of this week's parshah, is an extreme example this. She is also a symbol of any illicit desire a person may have and pursue with abandon. She may have been physically captured, but it was the Jewish soldier who came into her "gravitational field" who became emotionally captured and trapped.

The best way to avoid the danger of physical gravity is to stay far enough away from the source of it. Though the same can be said about emotional gravity, life is not always so straightforward. Sometimes a person finds himself thrust into a spiritually dangerous situation by no seeming negligence of his own. All of a sudden, he can find himself drawn after something to be avoided, wondering how to survive the test.

The Torah provides an answer. It tells us that resistance in the heat of the moment can actually

make the test worse than it already is. To the yetzer hara, "No!" can be "fightin' words." On the other hand, the Torah teaches, the yetzer hara might be willing to push off the pleasure of sin for a little while if it is under the impression it may come later on.

It's a stall tactic. It's a way to buy time. It's a way to allow the frontal cortex to kick in and reason with the rest of the brain. Love can be eternal, but infatuations are fleeting, especially when a person has time to consider the long term consequences of his short term indulgence.

In the case of the Yafes Toar, the Torah says, such an ill-begotten relationship can only lead to a future breakdown of their marriage. The "captured" soldier will more than likely come to hate his captive wife, and their children will end up being rebellious. He will come to forget what it was in the first place that made him blunder.

This may sound overly simplistic, but really it is not. This happens to just about anyone regarding that which they acquire or enjoy illicitly. It's the way we human beings have been hardwired. We may resist work and go out of our way to avoid struggle, but ultimately we only really enjoy the fruits of our labor.

Thus, the rabbis have taught:

Weigh the loss [that may be sustained through the fulfillment] of a commandment against the reward [that may be obtained] for [fulfilling] it. And [weigh] the gain [that may be obtained through the committing] of a transgression against the loss [that may be sustained] by [committing] it. (Pirkei Avos 2:1)

What this essentially says is that sin is a trap of the moment. Rise above the moment and free yourself from the gravity of the sin. The yetzer hara is an artist who paints a picture of opportunity in broad and colorful strokes. He is defenseless, though, against the black-and-white reality of ultimate gain versus ultimate loss.

Taking this idea to another level, imagine working hard for years, only to be paid in a defunct currency. How would you feel? What would you do? How would you survive?

Now imagine working for an entire lifetime and then going to the World-to-Come and finding out that the "currency" of the World-to-Come is different than the one you came with. You may have made a lot of money where you came from, but it is not the accepted currency of where you're going. That would be disastrous, eternally disastrous.

So, what IS the currency of Olam HaBa? It's obvious: mesiras Nefesh—self-sacrifice. This is what the following short, simple, extremely crucial, and highly educational statement means:

According to the pain is the reward. (Pirkei Avos 5:23)

The reward to which this teaching refers is what a person will receive in Olam HaBa, not in this world. The pain of which it speaks is the extent to which a person puts himself or herself out for the sake of

learning Torah and the performance of mitzvos. No pain when keeping Torah, little gain in the World-to-Come.

In general, mitzvos do not require much intention. Basically, you just have to have intention for the mitzvah to get rewarded for it. Therefore, if a person happens to "blank out" while in the process of performing a mitzvah he intended to do, he is still rewarded for having done it.

Though the reward for such a mitzvah will still be beyond anything we can now imagine, it will not compare at all to the reward for a mitzvah performed with intention. And yet, the reward for a mitzvah performed with intention will not come close to the reward for a mitzvah accomplished with intention and through self-sacrifice.

It can be a mitzvah that a person does not want to do but does anyhow. It can be a sin a person is driven to commit, but refrains from committing. Both require self-sacrifice; both receive unimaginable eternal reward.

The above teaching goes together with the following:

This world is like a corridor before the World-to-Come. Rectify yourself in the corridor in order to be able to enter the banquet hall. (Pirkei Avos 4:16)

The reward of this world is not the same as the reward in the next world. The mishnah is telling us to be willing to sacrifice "goodies" in this world for the sake of the real and eternal pleasures of the next one. It is also confirming that the sacrifice will be well worth it, as contrary as this seems to us now.

These two messages are complemented by a third teaching from the Talmud. The scenario occurs after history has come to an end, when God will decide who deserves to go to the World-to-Come and who does not. If ever hindsight will be 20-20, it will be on that day.

The nations will then plead. "Offer us the Torah again, and we will obey it."

The Holy One, Blessed is He, will say to them, "Foolish people! He who took trouble [to prepare] on 'Erev Shabbos' can eat on 'Shabbos.' What, however, will a person eat on Shabbos who did not trouble himself on 'Erev Shabbos'?" (Avodah Zarah 3a)

"Erev Shabbos," of course, refers to this world, and "Shabbos," to the World-to-Come. Just as one cannot cook or bake on Shabbos in this world, one cannot earn reward in the World-to-Come, and really, as early as Yemos HaMoshiach.

If you want to eat cooked food on Shabbos, you have to prepare it before Shabbos. If you want to have merit to enjoy in the World-to-Come, you have to earn it now, in this world.

Physical comfort has its place in life. Never, though, as a replacement for mesiras Nefesh. Knowing this and how it is true is the path to profound joy in life, even during times of discomfort.